Teaching the Environment of
The Winter’s Tale: Ecocritical Theory
and Pedagogy for Shakespeare

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Recent accounts of Shakespeare have done a lot of useful work in exploring discursive intersections between gender and categories such as class, race, and sexual orientation,1 but there has been almost no work done that looks seriously at how representations of the early modern natural environment fit into such equations.2 While it is true enough that until recently fairly “little attention has been paid, in cultural analysis, to material means employed in cultural production,”3 it is perhaps less obvious to question how material resources (outside of the processes of the physical production of texts and their distribution) are figured in, called up, called into being, recalled, produced, and so on in processes of cultural work (such as plays by Shakespeare, for instance). Can we make “a case for an environmental basis of history?”4 How can a materialist criticism investigate the ways that the environment is worked in discourse? What are the ideological purposes and conditions for which the natural environment is produced in literature?

Critical tradition has read The Winter’s Tale as political, religious, and autobiographical allegory; as fantasy; as geographically improbable; as the work of someone other than Shakespeare; as realism par excellence; as the literature of escape; as a sophisticated vegetation myth; as boring; as a falling off; as a structural, thematic, or philosophical experiment; as a general failure; as a perfect example of symbolic technique; and so on. There have been reams written on that nasty bear who runs off with Antigonus; discussions about the tension between art and nature in the play are everywhere; and there have certainly been enough analyses of the role and function of natural imagery in the play. Sustained ecocritical readings of The Winter’s Tale, however, are not
part of the play’s critical history. Part of the reason is simply that the necessary critical and pedagogical terms for meaningful discussion are only now becoming available.

It is possible for at least two reasons to debate such well-established issues as misogyny, racism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism in Shakespeare: first, in each case the estranged and disaffected subjects are material things that walk among (often as a threat to) fully enfranchised subjects; and second, it is possible to debate the issues because there is a whole litany of terms with which to describe and then examine the concepts. If, for example, “misogyny” is a hatred of women; “racism,” of racial difference; “homophobia,” of same-sex issues; and “anti-Semitism,” of Jewishness and Jews—then what should we call a fear and contempt for the environment? Perhaps we might use a term such as “ecophobia,” but whatever the terminology, the ways in which the environment is perceived and represented—for better and for worse—are concerns of ecocriticism.5

There are, of course, several important questions here: what on earth is ecocriticism, how do one do it, what does it do, and, most important, why bother? Are there revealing links between environmentally and socially oppressive systems, overlapping and interlocking structures that need to be examined? Keith Thomas maintains that “it is impossible to disentangle what the people of the past thought about plants and animals from what they thought about themselves”;6 but is it possible to proceed on (or avoid) such an assumption without reproducing the anthropocentrism that undergirds our current environmental crises?

For a play that foregrounds the pastoral tradition so heavily, that stresses so insistently a relationship between nature and art, that is so deeply rooted at many levels in conceptual dividedness, an ecocritical approach can help to give the student an understanding of the literary traditions at work in the text. It can also give insights about “interconnectedness” (a keyword of ecocriticism); of ways in which nonliterary texts and assumptions about nature come to bear on the play; of ways that the division between men and women in the play might be viewed as part of a larger dynamic (larger than simple anthropocentric models) through which difference is designated; and of ways that the play might be seen to participate in our own relationship with the natural world. If our critical work is really directed toward helping people change the way they think and behave, then there has certainly never been a better time to look at these kinds of issues.

Yet as Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O’Connor point out, “it is only too easy to read and/or write as a born-again poststructuralist/ Marxist and still teach like an unregenerate New Critic.”7 It is a position that Richard Paul Knowles develops in his brief but evocative article, which seeks, as its subtitle suggests, a way “Towards a Materialist Pedagogy.” The problem, Knowles understands, is that the shift in theoretical analysis “has not yet made much impact on classrooms and curricula.”8 Consequently, when we start talking about the environment in The Winter’s Tale in ways that are clearly not directed toward thematic or imagistic readings, it is not only strong curiosity but often a sense of bewilderment that students express in response. Students want to know what ecocriticism is and how it can be applied to a text such as The Winter’s Tale.

ECOCRITICAL THEORY

The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) recently posted a number of position papers on the Internet that attempt to define ecocriticism. Some are proudly antithetical. Some are dogmatic and prescriptive in their listing of ecocritical principles. Some claim that no such lists have yet been given and hunger for ecocritical theory. Some think they offer answers. Some only raise questions. All of them struggle with the hard reality that ecocriticism is a thing that was named before it was properly born.9

The 1999 PMLA Forum on Literatures of the Environment, also posted on the ASLE Website, registers a continuing dissatisfaction with the status of ecocriticism, with many of the contributions (my own included) griping about ecocriticism’s shortcomings. One of the recurring complaints (one that this current essay addresses) is that the boundaries of ecocriticism have been far too constricted.10 A primary question, inextricably linked to these discussions must be, what is ecocriticism, if it is anything at all? What counts as ecocriticism, and what doesn’t?11

Cheryll Glotfelty’s 1996 Ecocriticism Reader did a tremendous amount in helping to formalize the critical status of ecocriticism. It was the first of its kind—an anthology of essays devoted to organizing an area of study whose efforts had, until then, not been “recognized as belonging to a distinct critical school or movement.”12 In it, Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.”13 She argues that it is difficult to defend the traditional failure of
the literary profession to address “green” issues. Glen Love, paraphrasing Glotfelty’s point, puts it best: “race, class, and gender are words which we see and hear everywhere at our professional meetings and in our current publications . . . [but] the English profession has failed to respond in any significant way to the issue of the environment.”¹⁴ That was then, and, as Love knows, things are changing; the English profession is responding, but the direction of the response may not be very revolutionary. Love has recently noted that “the study of literature and the environment and the practice of ecocriticism has begun to assume an active place in the profession”; however, he also seems to feel some unease about “what that place is to be, particularly in its theoretical and methodological base.”¹⁵

In the same year that Glotfelty’s collection came out, Lawrence Buell published The Environmental Imagination, where he defines “ecocriticism” . . . as [a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis.”¹⁶ Buell acknowledges that there is some uncertainty about what the term exactly covers but argues, “if one thinks of it . . . as a multiformal inquiry extending to a variety of environmentally focused perspectives more expressive of concern to explore environmental issues searchingly than of fixed dogmas about political solutions, then the neologism becomes a useful omnibus term for subsuming a large and growing scholarly field.”¹⁷

Buell’s definition is valid, as far as it goes. Like Glotfelty—indeed, like many people who are calling themselves ecocritics these days—Buell uses ecocriticism as if it were designed only for nature writing.

Examining nature writing is, of course, one of the things ecocriticism does, and does well; but when nature writing constitutes the sole purview of ecocriticism, the lack of theoretical diversity, conceptual in-breeding, and a weakening of contacts with the wider literary world will spell disaster for the approach. Focusing exclusively on nature writing wrongly suggests an essential link between ecocriticism as a methodology and nature writing as the natural object of its inquiry. As Ursula K. Heise poignantly asserts, “ecocriticism has nothing specifically to do with nature writing.”¹⁸ Environmental issues are written into many nooks and crannies of canonical literature, in much the same way that issues of concern to other kinds of theorists are embedded in “the canon.” As Glotfelty herself acknowledges, feminist theorists do not confine themselves to works about feminism any more than Marxist theorists confine themselves to works about Marxism or commodity fetishism. The next logical question, then, is simple: why should ecocriticism restrict itself to the genre of nature writing?

Assuming that ecocriticism need not (and, in fact, should not) restrict itself to texts about nature, the ecocritic is immediately faced with another obstacle: namely, that the polyphony of critical voices articulate at times seemingly opposed purposes—and, indeed, definitions—resulting in a hydra-headed monster that often seems to be speaking in tongues or at cross-purposes.

Stephanie Sarver goes as far as to say that ecocriticism has remained less a theory than a focus: “‘Ecocriticism’ is . . . an unfortunate term because it suggests a new kind of critical theory. The emerging body of work that might be labeled ecocritical is united not by a theory, but by a focus: the environment. This ecocritical work draws on a variety of theories, such as feminist, Marxist, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic and historicist.”¹⁹ In a sense, Sarver has a point, but it is a point that may be applied to any kind of theory, indeed the very theories she mentions as being theories in themselves: feminist, Marxist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, and historicist theories. All of these draw heavily on other theories that preceded them. Such borrowing, however, is exactly what goes on in the articulation of a new critical practice. All theories are a synthesis, and Sarver’s apparent failure is in not recognizing this fact. Nevertheless, the argument Sarver is making is valid insofar as it calls ecocriticism to task for not being theorized enough.

Patrick D. Murphy offers the most promising synthesis of material that works toward articulating a methodology for ecocriticism. For him, the problem with ecocriticism is that too much of it “remains theoretically unsophisticated. Too often, there remains an anti-theoretical, naïve, realist attitude expressed in” the work of ecocritics.²⁰ In place of these theoretically unsophisticated stances, Murphy offers a Bakhtinian “dialogical orientation,” which, he maintains, “reinforces the ecofeminist recognition of interdependence and the natural need for diversity.”²¹ Sarver would argue that this is simply not good enough. In her own words, “Literary scholars who are environmentalists seem not to be creating a new critical theory; rather, they are drawing on existing theories to illuminate our understanding of how human interactions with nature are reflected in literature.”²² The dialogic answer would be that such borrowing is exactly what goes on in the articulation of a new critical practice. If nothing else, Murphy
succeeds in taking ecocriticism out of the hands of the theoretically unsophisticated. If Murphy is to be critiqued, it is for the theory that he chooses rather than for the choosing of theory. We might debate the usefulness of Bakhtinian dialogics, for instance, but that is not part of my project here.

While ecocritical debates are developing, one thing is agreed on: ecocriticism must create change. In a sense, though perhaps few practitioners would agree, ecocriticism is an approach with heavy leanings toward various materialist critiques. We can answer the question about why bother with ecocriticism in the same way that we answer detractors who ask why, for example, bother with materialist-feminist approaches. We bother with ecocriticism because there are problems in these times; because understanding the relationship of humanity with the natural environment, both in contemporary times and in earlier periods, can help us to understand how we got to where we are; because it is time to start looking at the ways that we conceptualize the natural world, and how these conceptualizations affect our behaviors toward the natural environment; in short, because it is important.

Ecocritical Theory and Pedagogy for Shakespeare: A Brief Study of The Winter's Tale

What does ecocriticism have to do with The Winter's Tale, a text written hundreds of years before we noticed the hole in our sky? Students and teachers alike have wildly mixed responses to The Winter's Tale, and teaching the play (not to mention environmental issues within it) is no easy task. Part of the difficulty for students is that the play seems disjointed—the pastoral scene of act 4 radically counterposed to the court scenes, in terms both of physical and temporal scene, is one of the most immediate problems. Acknowledging the perceived disjunctions and continuities of the play is a useful pedagogical maneuver that helps students begin informed discussions.

One of the more fruitful lines of comparison for students looks, for example, at the dynamic similarities between representations of the natural environment and of women in the play. This approach is easily accessible because it resembles (and can too easily swing into) a formalist thematic groove (which students tend to prefer because it is easier to do than materialist criticism). The representations of women and the environment clearly articulate values about patriarchal power that the text carries. Both the environment and women are characterized in ideologically highly charged terms. The environment and women are often either good or bad in Shakespeare: in The Winter's Tale, the environment is a vicious space of bears and wolves, or else a beautiful place of fertility and abundance; women are liars, shrews, and lechers all, or else they are chaste, guiltless, or otherwise guileless. There is no ambiguity in this play. Paulina is a good woman, as is Hermione, but the spectator (constructed with all of the insecurities of a man like Leontes) is dragged along and made complicit in the testing of these women. Justifiably or not, the audience may wonder about Hermione and about whether Leontes has just cause in his worries. This possibility raises several questions that are difficult to answer but useful for students to consider. Do men and women in the class have the same thoughts about Hermione? Where do these responses come from? What ideological positions do these responses to Hermione support?

Of course, students soon see that there really are no evil women in the play, that Hermione is evil only in the mind of Leontes, and that Paulina's open revolt against constituted authority is for a higher moral good than that which the Crown pretends to represent. It is then worth pointing out to students that phobic reactions toward Hermione cannot be rationalized, and that misogynistic fear is the only foundation for Leontes' rage and jealousy.

We cannot, however, say the same of the fear and loathing that the play generates for the natural environment. If the play challenges gynophobia (no matter how weakly, ineffectively, or inadvertently), it fails to challenge ecophobia. After all, the hapless Antigonus does have an unfortunate and fatal encounter with a bear, which "tore out his shoulder bone" (3.3.89) and ate him. And moments before this, "the sea mock'd" (3.3.92) and "swallowed with yeast and froth" (3.3.87) the equally unfortunate mariners who accompanied Antigonus. The anthropocentric image is of the environment as some kind of disaffected subject (in competition with the men), whose raison d'être is to cause chaos, pain, suffering, or loss. It is ruthless, both in the anthropocentric language that the characters in the play use to describe it, and in the audience's understanding of it as a hostile threat to order and goodness.

David Laird argues that the main problem for Leontes is in keeping a sense of order and goodness, and that it is a linguistic problem: "To control language, to exercise the power to name, categorize, and classify is an essential weapon in the arsenal" of
things Leontes uses to control his world; so, when Leontes thinks that Hermione uses “a discourse where meanings are multiple, ambiguous,” we may want to encourage students to talk about the various ways that the play talks about the disruptions of order, transgressions, and, in particular, pollution. There may be times when we really do not like the environment that this play describes, and the two-dozen references, oblique and direct, to pollution in The Winter’s Tale contribute to this ecophobic reaction.

Often metaphorical, pollution in the play covers a broad field: epistemological pollution (rotten opinions [2.3.90] and infected knowledge [2.1.43–44]), gender pollution (the blurred gender boundaries of the “mankind witch” [2.3.68]), sanguinary pollution (Polixenes’ infected blood [2.1.58–59], “an infected jelly” [1.2.417–18]), and air pollution (the infected air of Sicilia [5.1.167–69], an instance of environmental pollution working allegorically as a metaphor for the pollution of the body politic). But by far the most important kind of pollution in The Winter’s Tale is perhaps best described as “genetic.” It is on this string that most of the plays thematic issues hang, and its acme is reached in the play’s pastoral interlude. It is a formal debate between Polixenes and Perdita on the division between art and nature, resting on anxieties first about crossbreeding, and second about definitions, classifications, and naming.

The question of crossbreeding has numerous implications, both in the play and in early modern culture in general. It is an important question in regard to the protagonist couple, Perdita and Florizel, who, to all appearances, are mismatched: Perdita, ostensibly a country lass; Florizel, a prince. The whole section on what Perdita calls “Nature’s bastards” (4.4.83) smacks heavily of allegory: if there is any doubt about whom the gentler scion or the wildest stock might refer to, it is dispelled a moment later by Perdita when she talks about Florizel breeding or reproducing by her (4.4.103). In an instant, she has colocated women with breeding animals and fertile flora. Yet this is the same woman who sees crossbreeding as a diluting of nature, a hybridization and infection of natural processes: “I care not to get slips from them [crossbred things]” (4.4.83–84), she insists, because she thinks that selective breeding “shares / With great creating Nature” (4.4.87–8). The argument that Polixenes makes is that Perdita (of ostensibly wild stock) and Florizel (a gentler scion) can crossbreed profitably and without fear of the kind of pollution Perdita seems to imagine. Polixenes has argued that in a material sense crossbreeding, rather than polluting nature is, in fact, natural: it uses natural materials.

Crossbreeding, nevertheless, a form of pollution in the text as in the larger culture of which the text is a part, disrupts classification systems, blurs “natural” with “unnatural,” culturally acceptable with unacceptable, fair issues with monstrous ones. While we are, for the most part, spared real disaster in the play (perhaps because the play is generically confused, beginning in high tragic style and switching abruptly to comic mode with the sudden appearance of the bear in act 3, scene 3), what we do get is a jiggling of classificatory schemata, and people suffer when there is this kind of jiggling. With all the images of monstrosity, disease, infection, and pollution that run through this play, and with all of the implied and explicit questions about what is what, people (children and women in particular) suffer. Mamillius dies; Hermione has half her life taken away and for sixteen years has no daughter. And why? We might ask our students if they think that Leontes is terribly strange in his feelings about women. We might also point out that there is a long history in Western culture of perceiving and constructing women as sources of pollution, and that we see this history in much early modern drama.

We will ask our students to think things through, to try to understand how materials are manipulated in this and other plays. Camillo argues that “‘tis safer to / Avoid what’s grown than question how ‘tis born” (1.2.432–33), but doing this doesn’t get us anywhere.

The methodological ground of ecocriticism is interdisciplinary, regardless of Stephanie Sarver’s views, and there are numerous routes we could take to continue an ecocritical reading of The Winter’s Tale. We could use theories from social and feminist geography to help us think about space, place, and the widely dissociative geographies in The Winter’s Tale. We might argue that because the pastoral scenes represent not only a different geographical space but a different political economy, it is a mistake to think that we can talk meaningfully about social relations in the play without talking about how the production of space bears on these relations. Another issue that we could look at is the spatial dimensions of the play’s patriarchy: the patriarchal assumptions of Sicilia remain essentially unchallenged, and the space of Bohemia remains an unrealistic ideal (with a few fatal exceptions), insofar as it represents the “flower power” dream of the play, the never-never land where all is happy and peaceful but which cannot actually be located on a map. Certainly space and
its conceptualization in this play are very significant, not only for the choppy plot but, more important, because they determine the structure of the lived experiences of the people in those spaces. Discussing such things is the heart and soul of literary criticism, but ecocritical readings, which position themselves on par with feminist, Marxist, and materialist readings have, for the most part, been ridiculed. I have tried to suggest what shape an ecritical reading of The Winter’s Tale might take, and though I suspect that I have not provided much more than a truncated, fragmentary study, I hope I have also provided at least the beginnings of a convincing argument for ecritical Shakespeares and for confronting the “inevitable difficulties” that attend such an approach.28

NOTES


2. The most promising recent gesture vowing to link ecocritical approaches and Shakespeare texts came in March 2001 in Toledo, Ohio, at the Ohio Shakespeare Conference. This conference, entitled The Nature of Shakespeare, took as its focus the relationships between nature and Shakespeare and showed a remarkable openness to discussions that ranged far outside the thematicism that has so long beleaguered other similar discussions.


5. I use the term “ecophobia” to denote fear and loathing of the environment in much the same way that the term “homophobia” denotes fear and loathing of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals; see my “Conceptualizing the Other in Hostile Early Modern Geographies: Situating Ecocriticism and Difference in Shakespeare,” Journal of English Language and Literature 45, no. 4 (December 1999): 877-88.


13. Ibid., xviii.


17. Ibid.


21. Ibid., 22. See also Murphy’s “Anotherness and Inhabitation in Recent Multicultural American Literature,” in Writing the Environment, 42.

22. Sarver, "What Is Ecocriticism?"

23. There is no shortage of books and articles that look at the representations of natural environments in Shakespeare. In general, these books and articles fall under two general categories: the formalist camp and what I would call the proto-ecocritical group. The formalists have looked at birds, plants (especially flowers), gardens, the relationship between nature (as a general theme) and genre, the way the natural environment could be seen to fit into cosmic patterns, and so on. The difference between the group I am calling proto-ecocritical and the earlier group is in the kind of analysis that is being undertaken. While the former is structuralist (concerned primarily with enumerating instances of thematic clusters, with comparing such clusters, with trying to get idealist pictures of the English Renaissance, and so on), the latter is poststructuralist in its various movements toward theoretical analyses of the ways that thinking and talking about the natural world interrelate with other early modern discourses. In The Shakespearean Wild: Geography, Genus, and Gender (Lincoln, Neb., and London: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1991), Jeanne Addison Roberts marks the stages in the evolution of Shakespeare’s ideas about the wild (84) in a largely formalist attempt to analyze discursive relationships, “how the construction of Culture and Wild [in Shakespearean literature] shapes our perceptions of femaleness” (12). In Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), John Gillies relies heavily on detailed discussions about the influence of classical texts on Shakespeare and elegantly maps the coordinates linking geographical difference with social exclusion and otherness. Richard Marienstras, a proto–new historicist, tries, among other things, to unearth early modern environmental laws, the background against which Shakespeare wrote; see his New Perspectives on the Shakespearean World, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press;
31. We don't see disaster of the kind that we see, for instance, in other plays of Shakespeare where there is similar substantial boundary transgression. Othello, Titus Andronicus, and even Romeo and Juliet come to mind (the latter because the warring families could be argued to constitute a version of class conflict and can unquestionably be said to profile a forbidden inter-breeding).

32. Linda Woodbridge explains that if pollution is primarily the transgression of culturally significant boundaries, bodily orifices being one such set of boundaries, then it is easy to see why men constitute women as a site of pollution: "women have more orifices than men to start with, which may be why the female body offers the more frequent image of society endangered" ("Protection," 52). Leonard Tennenhouse urges much the same position, claiming that early modern tragedy "defines the female body as a source of pollution . . . any sign of permeability automatically endangers the community": Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare’s Genres (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), 117–18. The female rape victim becomes a site of pollution (as her tousled hair perhaps signifies), and the woman with her own sexuality is also a site of pollution (and a threat to the patriarchal hegemony). But the tradition that seeks to identify women as a source of pollution is not merely concerned with what goes in but with what comes out of the body as well. Thus, women who speak out of order become sites of pollution—perhaps an unfortunate metaphor, since it genders my topic in ways that indict me for my own sexism. Nevertheless, I began by saying that ecocriticism is a thing that has been named but not properly born, and the question of how something is born—the methodologies of its birth—strikes me as vitally important.

33. Much of what I have been talking about in this essay centers on birthing—perhaps an unfortunate metaphor, since it genders my topic in ways that will be discussed over the last couple of decades.

34. The fantasy of an idyllic paradise, in part, is what fueled the imperial drive to the New World at precisely the time the play was written, as many people have noted over the last couple of decades.

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